

VZCZCXYZ0012  
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTH #1659/01 3291642  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
O R 251642Z NOV 09  
FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1132  
INFO RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS

UNCLAS ATHENS 001659

SIPDIS  
STATE PASS TO U.S. FOREST SERVICE  
STATE PASS TO USAID/OFDA  
STATE PASS TO FEMA

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [PREL](#) [SENV](#) [SOCI](#) [GR](#)  
SUBJECT: Greece: Lacking a Fire Prevention Strategy Despite US  
Cooperation

REF: A.) 08 ATHENS 847; B.) 09 ATHENS 1560; C.) 09 ATHENS 1547  
D.) 09 ATHENS 1643

-----  
Summary  
-----

¶1. (SBU) Despite significant U.S. cooperation programs, Greece continues to lack a comprehensive fire prevention policy and does not have a wildfire prevention strategy. The Greek Government has sought to leverage any investment the U.S. is willing to provide in wildfire prevention and emergency response planning, but appears to have difficulty prioritizing its needs. Additionally, U.S. willingness to support Greece's fire department and emergency responders has helped our bilateral relationship. A primary obstacle, however, has been a Greek bureaucracy that has not been conducive to interagency cooperation. The recent restructuring of the government under the newly-elected Panhellenic Socialist Movement party (PASOK), however, may provide an opportunity for the U.S. to more effectively support Greece's effort to improve its fire prevention posture. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and FEMA have been involved in successful initiatives to train appropriate Greek organizations on firefighting and emergency response, but Post believes remaining U.S. funding and support would be more effective if focused on encouraging a comprehensive fire prevention policy.

-----  
Weak Forest Department Leaves Emphasis on Fire Suppression, Not  
Prevention  
-----

¶2. (U) Wildfires are a frequent phenomenon in Greece in the summer months. Although forests do have the ability to regenerate themselves after burning, the rate of wildfires in Greece has far outpaced the regeneration cycle. The seriousness of the problem was exemplified in 2007 when Greece experienced its worst fire season in modern history; the fires burned over 800,000 acres of land, damaged over 3,000 buildings, and killed 76 people (see reftel A). Despite the predictability of the timing and destructiveness of wildfires, Greece has not prioritized fire prevention and forest monitoring. This was evident in the fires in 2009, which while not as devastating as 2007, consumed about 50,000 acres and 50 homes (see reftel B).

¶3. (SBU) Greece's ability to prevent and contain wildfires began to erode significantly about a decade ago, when the Government of Greece (GoG) shifted responsibility for wildfire management from the Greek forestry protection service, now the General Directorate of Development and Protection of Forests (DPF), to the Hellenic

Fire Service (HFS). The forest protection service, comprising forest rangers, was charged with studying, monitoring, and protecting the Greek wild lands. HFS, without the equivalent forestry knowledge and experience, had a mandate and structure focused on responding to fires in urban areas rather than preventing the breakout of fires in more rural areas. According to a Greek forest expert, this policy decision left no entity within the GoG adequately equipped to monitor and protect Greece's forests. This policy change may have seriously undermined Greece's ability to prevent and contain wildfires.

14. (SBU) HFS does not prioritize or value fire prevention as a key aspect of fire management. According to Dr. Gavriil Xanthopoulos, an expert on Greek wildfires from the Institute of Mediterranean Forest Ecosystems & Forest Product Technology, ever since HFS took over the responsibility for protecting Greece's forests the DPF has seen its staff reduced, its budget slashed, and its area of responsibility diminished. Though, in contrast, the Fire Service's staff and budget have increased to cover its larger mandate. The Fire Service, however, has continued to focus on its mission of protecting lives and personal property. Public relations officer for HFS Ioannis Kapakis, in a September 2009 meeting with Econoff, confirmed this view, stating that Greece does not prioritize fire prevention programs. Utilizing the 2007 funding provided by USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) (see reftel A), the USFS has provided, in addition to other technical assistance, fire prevention training programs to Greece. However, Kapakis told Econoff that the Aerial Firefighting Training and the Fire Investigation Training were the most useful training programs

provided.

15. (U) Comparisons between fire damage two decades ago versus today point to the need to prioritize fire prevention. According to a 2008 study from the EC Joint Research Centre's Institute for Environment and Sustainability, the total area burned in Greece in the period between 1990 and 1999 was just over 108,000 acres. In the period from 2000 to the present day, approximately 160,000 acres have burned in Greece. While factors such as climate change, development and arson (many Greeks often remark that ambitious landowners have purposefully burned their forest land to construct illegal homes) may be contributing factors, the 2008 EC study estimated that more than 50 percent of forest fires in Southern Europe are caused by human negligence. Fire prevention programs, therefore, could have a significant impact in helping to reduce the incidence of fires and minimizing the damage once fires break out. In the mid-1990s, DPF had established a forestry-trained military unit called the 'dasokommando' (Forest Commandos) with the help of Xanthopoulos, whose mission was to contain forest fires, and protect against the extreme spread of dangerous fires during the dry season. The team was trained in specific techniques at containing forest fires, and the unique aspects of Greece's forests.

-----  
-----  
Greek Agencies Happy With US Support; But Disorganization Adds Confusion  
-----  
-----

16. (SBU) The GoG has been enthusiastic about US support to improve their fire management and emergency response posture. Following the Ambassador's declaration of a national disaster during the 2007 Greek fires, USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) allocated what came to be a total of USD 2.2 million in monetary assistance to Greece. Reftel A outlines the specifics of the package, which included an initial assessment of emergency post-fire needs and recommendations for next steps. Since then, the United States has cooperated with relevant Greek ministries to provide different training programs related to fire management and emergency response. The USFS has provided the Fire Service various training programs using funding from the 2007 USAID assistance package. Also, USFS has sponsored Greek foresters from DPF to attend training in the US with OFDA funding through USFS's

international programs. Separate from programs funded using the 2007 assistance, FEMA has also engaged with the GoG in broader disaster assistance areas. FEMA recently completed a two-week training program in Athens in early November to administer a Master Exercise Practitioner Program course to emergency response officials from different regions in Greece.

¶17. (SBU) U.S. funding, however, would have a bigger, more meaningful impact if the GoG had a clear policy objective to prevent wildfires. There is a lack of coordination within the GoG on how remaining U.S. assistance funds should be programmed. Kelly Saini, Special Advisor to the Secretary General of Civil Protection, has requested that the United States send Greek civil servants to the United States for emergency response training, suggesting we divert previously allocated funds from the 2007 USFS assistance package with HFS to Civil Protection. This request, however, does not appear to be coordinated with the HFS, for whom the funding was originally intended. The USFS has been waiting for the HFS to respond with its 2010 training priorities, which have been delayed as a result of the October elections and subsequent reorganization. Econoff and USFS official have asked the Ministry of Citizens' Protection, which oversees both Civil Protection and the HFS to prioritize their programming requests for the final tranche of U.S. assistance (approximately \$250,000). Post is urging they consider a focus on preventative programs. The disorganization and bureaucracy has discouraged many foreign governments from cooperating with Greece in the past. The British withdrew their offers of assistance in 2007, choosing not to fight a Greek bureaucracy that resisted addressing critical issues (see reftel A). Recently, the USFS offered the Greek Forest Department two fully-paid spots in a watershed management course for April 2010, but Greek officials missed the November 1 deadline to name their candidates, and have not been responsive to date.

-----

COMMENT: New Leadership in GoG, New Opportunity for US Cooperation

-----

-----

¶18. (SBU) The new GoG's avowed concern for the environment provides an opening for the U.S. to urge the prioritization of effective forest monitoring in order prevent and contain wildfires (see reftel C). Previously, the Forest Department was under the Ministry of Rural Development and Food but it was recently moved to the new Ministry of Environment, Energy, and Climate Change. The new Environment Minister, Tina Birbilli, already has taken on the issue of illegal construction in forests, proposing a bill on October 27 that would suspend all construction on burnt forestland in Attica and across Greece until government inspectors establish accurate forest maps. Still, with the Hellenic Fire Service under the Citizens' Protection Ministry and the Forest Department in the Environment Ministry, the GoG will have to improve its interagency cooperation to effectively coordinate all aspects of fire policy, from prevention to suppression (see reftel D). The Ambassador will be sending a summary of recommendations based on USFS visits and studies to the Minister of Citizens' Protection (see reftel D). The recommendations emphasize interagency cooperation and fire prevention.

¶19. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED. Any future U.S. support, including the remaining \$250,000 from the 2007 USFS assistance package, should help support a proactive fire prevention campaign, as this can have a larger and longer-term impact on Greece's fire posture. Also, the remaining U.S. funds should be used to train officials in Greece, as this too can have a more far-reaching impact than sending a small handful of officials to the U.S. for training. END COMMENT.  
Speckhard